

# Ritual and money in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*

Richard Seaford

One of the most famous scenes in all of Greek tragedy is the 'carpet scene' in Aeschylus' play, *Agamemnon* (lines 914–74). Troy has fallen and Agamemnon, King of Mycenae, returns home victorious. As he arrives at the palace, his homecoming is intercepted by his wife, Clytemnestra, who stands at the doorway insisting that to gain entry he walk over expensive, purple textiles. Little does he know that she has been having an affair with Aegisthus behind his back. He gives in to his wife's demands and walks over the tapestries. Striking though the scene is, concentrating on its language opens up an additional layer of meaning beyond the dramatic impact.

Let us start by focusing on a single word: the textiles are 'bought with silver' (949 *arguronetous*). 'So what?' we might think, unless we bear in mind the Homeric epics on which tragedy is sometimes (and rather misleadingly) said to be modelled. In Homer, people do not buy things with money. Instead they barter for them. And textiles are woven by the women of the household – for instance by the virtuous wife Penelope who in the *Odyssey* is contrasted with the wicked wife Clytemnestra. Money was introduced into the Greek world in about 600 B.C. The idea of buying textiles with silver (money) seems normal to us, but in this context it marks a new – and potentially shocking – kind of household.

## Spend, spend, spend

Agamemnon is anxious that in trampling the textiles he will waste the wealth of the house. Clytemnestra responds: 'the sea exists – who will dry it up? – nurturing an ever-renewed gush – equal to silver – of much purple, dye for textiles'. She is thinking of the purple dye from shell-fish, which comes inexhaustibly from the inexhaustible sea. Because the dye is inexhaustible and 'equal to silver', the implication is that the house, which 'does not know how to be poor', has an inexhaustible supply of silver with which to buy it. The new phenomenon of (precious metal) money is – in contrast to earlier forms of wealth such as tripods – potentially *unlimited*. This strange new abstract un-limitedness is assimilated to the familiar concrete un-limitedness of the sea.

Not long after Agamemnon walks over the textiles into the house, he is killed by Clytemnestra in his bath. She throws over him a textile, which by trapping him makes it easier for her to kill him. She subsequently describes her action thus: 'an unlimited (*apeiron*) covering (*amphiblestron*), like (a net) for fish, I set around him, an evil wealth of textile'.

*Amphiblestron* comes from the verb *amphiballo*, which is used of dressing the corpse, and so suggests a funerary garment, which normally would not be bought but woven by the dead man's wife. This, along with many other such details, suggests that Clytemnestra is perverting funerary ritual, that is normally lovingly bestowed by a wife on her husband's corpse (bathing, dressing), into a means of killing him. As for *apeiron*, it refers to the fact that the textile has no limit or edge (*peras*) past which Agamemnon could escape. That is why it is like a net. The ancient funerary garment was wrapped around the hands and feet, and sometimes even over the head.

## Dirty money

This 'unlimited' funeral garment is also called an 'evil wealth of textile'. Why introduce here the idea of 'wealth'? It can only serve to associate the un-limitedness (of the textile) by which Agamemnon is trapped with the un-limitedness of the money by which the textile was bought. It is as if the shocking un-limitedness of available silver money has subverted the limit or closure inherent in funerary ritual. It has been pointed out by others that this textile, in which the corpse of Agamemnon is displayed, is closely associated with the textiles that he trampled. They are referred to by the same vocabulary. The trampled textiles are *porphyros*, the colour of blood. And when the funerary textile is displayed again at the end of Aeschylus' next play, *Libation Bearers*, it is said to have been dyed by the murder weapon and stained by the gush (*kekis*) of blood (*kekis* being the very word used earlier of the ever-renewed purple dye). After being assimilated to the dye from the sea, the abstract un-limitedness of money has here found another concrete embodiment, in the fatal un-limitedness of the dyed funerary garment by which Agamemnon is trapped.

This strand of meaning is akin to those passages elsewhere in the play that warn of the danger of excessive wealth (e.g. *Agamemnon* 772–81, 1008–14). But unlike them it evokes anxiety about the new form of wealth, money. Money is so much part of our world that this anxiety seems odd. But this means that Athenian tragedy can do us the service of making us think about money by making it less familiar.

Another example from the *Agamemnon* of the collision between the ancient power of ritual and the new power of money is in the metaphor of Ares, the god of war, as 'gold-changer of bodies' at Troy (437–55). In the pre-monetary world of Homer fighting is sometimes presided over by Zeus holding a balance that will decide the outcome. In Aeschylus, Ares holds a balance in the battle, but not as a judge: he is rather engaged in exchange, exchanging bodies for dust. He 'sends from Troy the fired heavy bitterly-lamented (gold-)dust to their dear ones, filling the urns with well-arranged (*euthetos*) ash in exchange for men.' The startling aspect of money here is its novel power to exchange bulky objects (bodies) for something much smaller (precious metal). The elaborate metaphor subtly identifies making money by sea-trade with the funerary ritual for ashes returned from a distant battle, all within the traditional idea of a god with a balance presiding over the battle.

This combination may occur within a single word: like *apeiron* of the textile above. *Euthetos* combines funerary ritual with money – for it evokes both the laying out of the dead and the ease of storage of precious metal as money. The combination is horrific, because it is also a collision between the collective but intimate values of ritual and the impersonal individualism of money, with the implication that warfare and funerary ritual must both bow to individual monetary gain. Indeed, the passage is followed immediately by a description of the general resentment against Agamemnon and Menelaus.

## The tyranny of wealth

We know from various texts, from Herodotus onwards, of the importance of the new phenomenon of money for a new kind of

ruler, the tyrant. Indeed, the political power bestowed by money, and the money obtainable by political power, may be more important to the tyrant even than loyalty to his own family and reverence for the gods. And so typically the tyrant may, for the sake of money and power, even kill members of his own family and abuse religious ritual. In tragedy too there is much killing within ruling families as well as abuse of religious ritual, whereas in Homer both these themes are largely avoided. Moreover, in the surviving tragedies the word for tyrant (*turan-nos*) and related words occur more than 170 times, whereas the word for 'hero' (and related words) occurs just once (of dead heroes). Tragedy is much influenced – far more than scholars have realized – by the idea of tyranny.

This is not to say that Agamemnon is represented as a tyrant. Rather, the *Agamemnon* dramatizes, unusually, a *move towards* tyranny. The seizure of power by Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus, is explicitly described as a tyrannical coup (1355, 1633). It is achieved by a murder within the family that is also – we have seen – the monied perversion of an intimate ritual. And it will be sustained by money. 'I will try to rule the citizens by this man's (Agamemnon's) money', says Aegisthus, and we soon learn what he means when a troop of soldiers is summoned to put an end to the resistance of the chorus. That is how the play ends. Tyrants hire thugs, then as now.

The *Agamemnon* dramatizes traditional pre-monetary myth in the shocking new world in which money may override the sanctity of ritual and of the family. In this it is not untypical, I believe, of Athenian tragedy as a whole.

*Richard Seaford is Professor of Greek Literature at the University of Exeter. Amongst his many publications, his book Money and the Early Greek Mind: Homer, Philosophy, Tragedy was published by Cambridge University Press in 2004.*